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ABSTRACT

The graduation rates of students admitted to the City University of New York (CUNY) by open admissions was studied as an extension of previous research. A sample of the initial freshman classes of 1970 and 1971 were tracked over a period of 11 years. A total of 4,705 open admissions students were compared to 8,084 regularly-admitted students. Since CUNY's policy was designed to expand educational opportunity for disadvantaged minority groups, data were also assessed for four major ethnic constituencies that comprise the majority of CUNY's entering classes. Graduation data were compared for White ethnic groups (Jewish and White Catholic) and minority groups (Black and Hispanic). Data are presented separately for CUNY's four- and two-year colleges. It was found that in the senior colleges, 34 percent of regularly-admitted students graduated after 4 years, and 62 percent needed 5 years or longer. Among open admissions students, only 16 percent earned diplomas after 4 years, but after 11 years 43 percent graduated. In the two-year community colleges, 45 percent of regular students and 28 percent of open admissions students completed their community college studies after 11 years. Additional time to graduate appeared especially important for CUNY's minority students. (SW)

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Long Term Graduation Rates of Students at The City University of New York

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March 1984

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LONG TERM GRADUATION RATES OF STUDENTS AT THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

by

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March 1984

INTRODUCTION*

Important educational innovations are often judged harshly if they fail to produce results within a set time. Such was the case with the early reports of failure in the Headstart program. However, when youngsters were tracked over a period of several years, significant long term benefits were identified. A similar situation has developed in higher education where a traditional measure of success, the four- or five-year graduation rate, may have moved out of line with reality to the point where it seriously underestimates institutional as well as individual results.

Recent events have altered the demographics of higher education, perhaps making conventional expectations inappropriate. During the late 1960s and throughout most of the 1970s, barriers to college admission fell throughout the country. At the same time, the percentage of students completing their degrees within four or five years also fell (see Ramist, 1981:3). Such results of expanded educational opportunity are problematic because, while a college diploma does not signify all of the benefits of a college education, graduation is often viewed by colleges, students, and the public as the bottom line of educational accounting.

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*This research was supported in part by a grant from The Spencer Foundation. We are indebted to William Protash, Fran Barrett, and Carla McGowan for their work in constructing a file that made possible the data analyses presented in this study.

Today, given the changes in student characteristics, adding up the ledger after four or five years might present a distorted picture of the graduation reality. Moreover, this short term measure of educational results is most rigorously applied to public institutions, since their funding places them under close scrutiny of state and local budget officials, legislators, and taxpayers. Ironically, it is public institutions for whom the short term view may be most inappropriate, given the high numbers of disadvantaged students they admit. It is those who begin college with academic deficiencies and sharply limited economic resources who are most likely to require longer than the traditional time period to finish a degree. As a consequence, official statistics, such as those on cohort survival collected and reported by New York State, and financial aid programs such as the New York State Tuition Assistance Program which contain five-year cutoffs as the outside limit for ultimate graduation may well penalize both open-access institutions and the students they attract. If the academic careers of today's undergraduates are frequently extended beyond conventionally defined limits, this would constitute an unarticulated national issue requiring the attention of policy-makers concerned with educational opportunity.

The issues we have raised are especially pertinent to the nation's urban public colleges and universities, since they are the ones that serve the largest proportions of economically and educationally disadvantaged students. Perhaps the most important

case in point is the City University of New York (CUNY) which initiated its controversial open admissions policy in fall 1970.

To many within the University and on the outside, the prospects seemed dim that the deluge of open admissions students would result in anything more than a trickle of graduates. This view was based on skepticism that large numbers of students, under-prepared by traditional college entrance criteria, could succeed in college level work. On the other hand, some anticipated that an open-admissions policy would seriously compromise standards--that underlying a patina of apparent academic success of the new students to CUNY would be a serious deterioration of academic rigor. It was feared that in its effort to equalize not only educational opportunity but also educational results, CUNY would lapse into "social promotion" (allowing students to progress through the system even though they were not academically prepared), a charge that had often been leveled at New York's primary and secondary schools. These contrasting expectations--between those who saw open admissions students as destined to fail and those who anticipated that their academic success would signal the erosion of academic standards--seemed irreconcilable.

Earlier data analyses, covering the first five years of open admissions, helped to clarify whether either view reflected the realities of CUNY. These analyses were presented in a volume published in 1981, Right Versus Privilege: The Open Admissions Experiment at the City University of New York

(co-authored by David E. Lavin, Richard D. Alba, and Richard A. Silberstein). They showed that graduation rates for open-admissions students were substantially lower than for regular students; i.e., the ones who would have qualified for entry to CUNY even under the rigorous admissions standards in force at the University during the 1960s. Indeed, over the first five years of the open-access policy, not even a third of the open-admissions students earned a diploma. Nonetheless, the graduation rates of these students compared favorably with national rates for students with comparable high school records. In short, the analyses suggested that neither the view of open-admissions students as destined to failure, nor the view of the University as turning into a diploma mill fitted the realities of CUNY in the early years of the open admissions policy.

While these calamities did not occur, the graduation story at CUNY was unique in some ways. One was the length of time required to graduate. The Lavin, Alba, and Silberstein volume showed that relatively few CUNY students graduated "on time." In its four-year or senior colleges a third of regular graduates and fully half of the open admissions contingent needed five years to complete their degrees. In the community colleges, on time graduation rates were exceedingly low. Most of the graduates received their degrees three, four, and even five years after entry.

This extended time to graduation may have been accentuated by open admissions, but it was not attributable solely to that policy. Indeed, a CUNY study done in the 1960s (Max, 1968), focusing on an academically strong sample, found that after four years the senior-college graduation rate was less than 50 percent. However, over 70 percent graduated after seven years. And a recent survey (Murtha, Protash, and Kaufman, 1983) showed that over half of baccalaureate graduates and three fourths of Associate degree holders required more than the traditional time to complete their studies. That CUNY students require longer than usual to graduate results from several processes. First, stopping out (interrupted college attendance) has been a common occurrence at CUNY for the last twenty years. Students have often taken a semester or two out of school to earn money to support college and related expenses. Others have had to work all the way through college and thus take fewer courses each semester. And since open admissions began, many students were required to register for remedial courses offering little or no credit. All of these factors would be expected to delay the time of graduation, especially after open admissions when more students needed to work and entered college with deficiencies in their academic preparation.

EXTENSION OF THE GRADUATION DATA

Recently we have been able to extend the findings from the studies (Lavin, et al., 1981) of the initial freshman classes

that entered CUNY after open admissions began. Those earlier studies had presented graduation rates covering 5 years for the 1970 entrants and 4 years for the 1971 freshmen. Our new analyses track a large sample of these two cohorts over a period of eleven years.[1] The data are organized in several ways. First, we have compared open admissions students with so-called regular students who did not need the policy of open admissions to qualify for acceptance.[2] Inasmuch as CUNY's policy was designed to expand educational opportunity for disadvantaged minority groups, we also present data for four major ethnic constituencies that comprise the bulk of CUNY's entering classes. The pertinent ethnic categories consist of Jewish, white Catholic, Black, and Hispanic students. Data are presented separately for CUNY's four- and two-year colleges.

RESULTS

The new data reveal dramatically that the progress of CUNY students toward graduation can extend over many years and thus, that the story of CUNY's open-access policy requires a long time in the telling. In the CUNY senior colleges Table 1 (see also Figure 1) shows that 34 percent of regular students graduated after four years, another 19 percent graduated after five years, and an additional 9 percent took more than five years to earn their bachelor's degrees, producing a total graduation rate of 62 percent. Among open admissions students, only 16 percent earned diplomas after four years, but another 16 percent

TABLE 1

GRADUATION RATES THROUGH 11 YEARS
For 1970 AND 1971 COHORTS:
SENIOR COLLEGES

Admissions Status	On Time	After 5 Years	After 7 Years	After 9 Years	After 11 Years
Regular Students (N=8084)	34	53	60	6[illegible]	62
Open Admissions Students (N=4705)	16	32	40	42	43

Source: Sample data

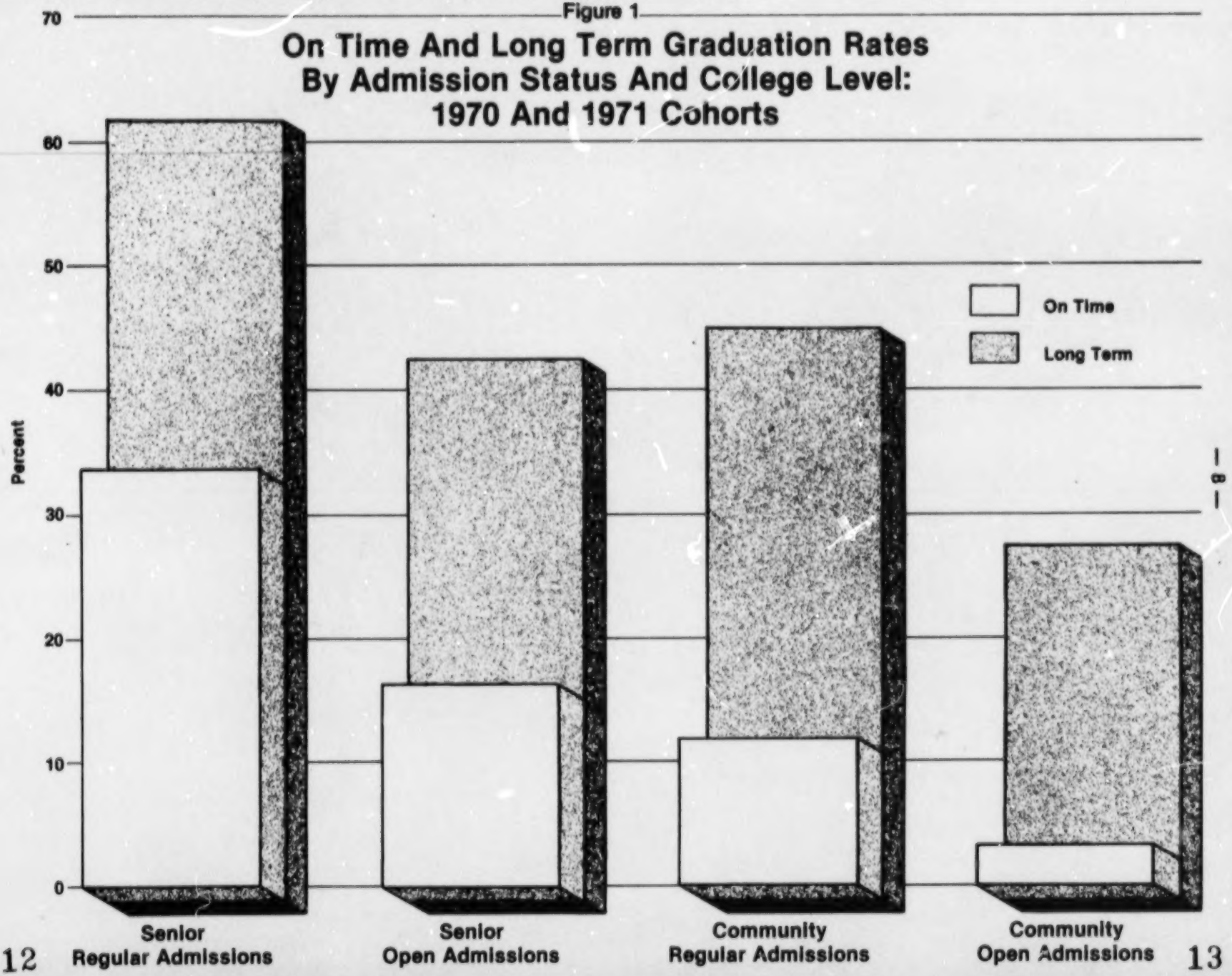
Results for the 1970 and 1971 cohorts have been aggregated.

Regular students are those with high school averages of 80 or higher.

Open admissions students are those with high school averages of less than 80.

Figure 1

On Time And Long Term Graduation Rates By Admission Status And College Level: 1970 And 1971 Cohorts



See Table 1 and 2 for explanatory notes.

graduated after five years. After eleven years an additional 11 percent had graduated, resulting in a total graduation rate of 43 percent. Looked at another way, 15 percent of all regular graduates needed more than five years to graduate, while among the open admissions graduates more than 25 percent needed more than five years to finish.[3] This suggests that additional time is more important for the open admissions students. To illustrate this we have calculated the ratio of graduation rates for open admissions students to the rates for regular students.[4] The latter were 2.1 times as likely as open admissions students to be on time graduates. After five years the rate for regulars was only 1.7 times that of open admissions students, and after eleven years, the ratio had dropped to 1.4. In short, over time there was a narrowing of the disparity in graduation rates between the two categories of students.

In the two-year community colleges, it is also clear that an extended time perspective is critically important for an accurate assessment of the graduation picture. As Table 2 shows (see Figure 1 also), on time graduation rates were exceedingly low: only 12 percent of regular students and but 3 percent of the open admissions contingent earned degrees after two years.[5] An additional year saw more than a doubling of the rate for regular students (from 12 to 29 percent). For open admissions students an extra year led to almost a fourfold increase (from 3 to 11 percent). An additional two years saw a further jump in the rates so that after 5 years 43 percent of regular students and

TABLE 2

GRADUATION RATES THROUGH 11 YEARS
FOR 1970 AND 1971 COHORTS:[a]
COMMUNITY COLLEGES

Admissions Status	On Time	After 3 Years	After 5 Years	After 7 Years	After 9 Years	After 11 Years
Regular Students[b] (N=2725)	12	29	43	44	45	45
Open Admissions[c] Students (N=4668)	3	11	25	27	27	28

Source: Sample data

[a]Results for the 1970 and 1971 cohorts have been aggregated.

[b]Regular students are those with high school averages of 75 or higher.

[c]Open admissions students are those with high school averages of less than 75.

25 percent of the open admissions group had received their Associate degree. While a leveling off occurred after this time, students continued to graduate: after eleven years, 45 percent of regulars and 28 percent of the open admissions students completed their community college studies.

Relative to the senior colleges, there was, in the two-year schools an even more dramatic narrowing over time of the gap in graduation ratios between open admissions students and their regular classmates. The latter were four times more likely to graduate on time; after three years they were 2.6 times as likely to graduate, and the gap between the two groups narrowed to 1.6 after seven years. More than 60 percent of the open admissions graduates needed more than three years to earn their degrees, compared with about 35 percent of regular students. That open admissions students continued to graduate in such substantial proportions even four or more years after community college entry appears quite remarkable, given the conventional wisdom about the typical length of time to earn a degree in a two-year institution.

One of the most important aims of the open admissions policy was to equalize educational opportunity for youth in New York City's minority communities. The entry of these students increased strikingly as a result of open admissions. But relative to whites, minority students came to CUNY with severe handicaps of economic status and academic preparation. As one might expect

given these inequities, white groups in CUNY's senior colleges were more likely to earn a B.A. degree than were minorities. The five year graduation rates for CUNY's white ethnics, Jewish and Catholic students, were higher in every case than for its minority students, Blacks and Hispanics (Table 3; see also Figure 2). To cite the widest differences among regular students, Jews had a five year graduation rate of 58 percent, compared with 35 percent among Hispanics. Among Jewish open-admissions students, the five-year rate was 37 percent, compared with 21 percent among Hispanics. But consideration of a longer time period reveals an important story about group differences in graduation rates. Among senior college regular graduates, 13 percent of Jews and 15 percent of Catholics needed more than five years to complete their degrees. The comparable figures for minorities were 24 percent for Blacks and 27 percent for Hispanics. For open admissions graduates 23 percent of Jews and Catholics took more than five years to finish. Larger proportions of minority graduates needed additional time: 35 percent of Blacks and 32 percent of Hispanics graduated more than 5 years after entry.

In short, additional time appears to be especially important for CUNY's minority students. As a result, initial ethnic differences in graduation rates at the end of five years are substantially reduced, and in some cases even eliminated after eleven years. For example, Catholic open admissions and regular students had higher five year graduation rates than their Black

TABLE 3

GRADUATION RATES THROUGH ELEVEN YEARS
BY ETHNICITY AND ADMISSIONS STATUS:
1970 AND 1971 COHORTS: SENIOR COLLEGES[a]

	On Time	After 5 Years	After 7 Years	After 9 Years	After 11 Years
Regular Students:[b]					
Jewish (N=3462)	40	58	66	67	67
Catholic (N=2887)[d]	35	50	56	57	59
Black (N=202)	32	45	53	56	59
Hispanic (N=389)	19	35	46	47	48
Open Admissions Students:[c]					
Jewish (N=139[illegible])	22	37	46	48	48
Catholic (N=165[illegible])[d]	19	31	38	39	40
Black (N=552)	17	26	35	38	40
Hispanic (N=393)	15	21	28	29	31

Source: Sample data

[a]Results for the 1970 and 1971 cohorts have been aggregated.

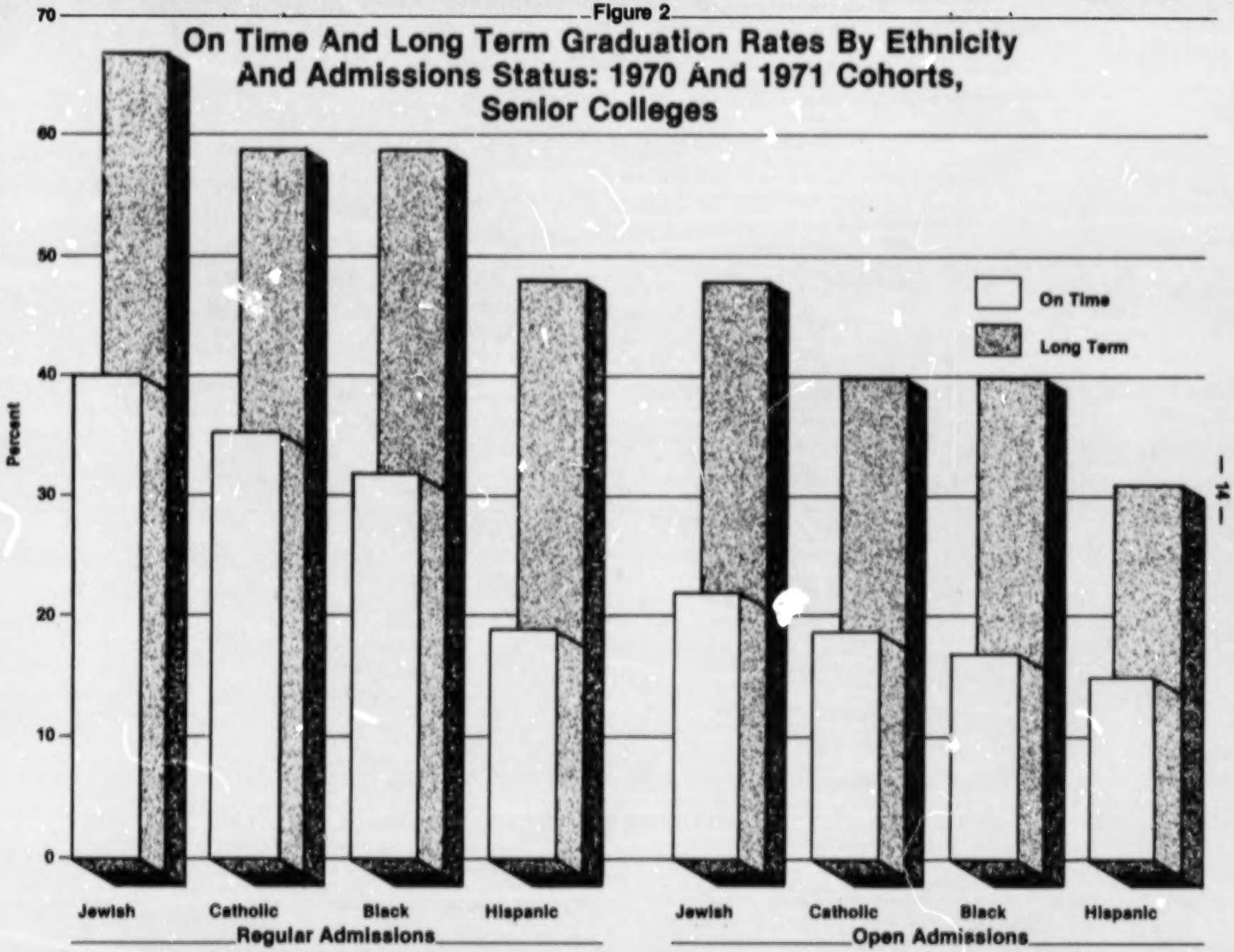
[b]Regular students are those with high school averages of 80 or higher.

[c]Open admissions students are those with high school averages of less than 80.

[d]The term "Catholic" refers to non-Hispanic Catholics.

Figure 2

On Time And Long Term Graduation Rates By Ethnicity And Admissions Status: 1970 And 1971 Cohorts, Senior Colleges



See Table 3 for explanatory notes.

counterparts. But Blacks continued to graduate at a greater rate than Catholics so that after eleven years Blacks and Catholics had identical rates of graduation.

Even in the community colleges minority graduates were disproportionately likely to earn degrees more than 5 years after entry. Calculations we have made from Table 4 (see also, Figure 3) indicate, for example, that among regular Jewish and Catholic graduates, 4 percent needed more than five years to earn their Associate degrees, while the comparable minority figures are 10 percent for Blacks and 8 percent for Hispanics. Among the open admissions group 17 percent of Black graduates needed more than five years to complete their degrees, almost twice as great as the figure for Jewish graduates (9 percent).

CONCLUSION

It has been the conventional wisdom at CUNY that many students require more than the traditional time span to earn a degree. But that wisdom also has assumed that after five years, additional time sees few additional graduates. The data we have presented challenge that view. Substantial numbers of students continue to graduate after six, seven or more years. This is especially true for open admissions students and for minorities. Indeed, these findings reveal a remarkable degree of persistence on the part of disadvantaged students in both senior and community colleges. These extended amounts of time to graduation

TABLE 4

GRADUATION RATES THROUGH ELEVEN YEARS BY ETHNICITY AND ADMISSIONS STATUS: 1970 AND 1971 COHORTS: COMMUNITY COLLEGES[a]

	On Time	After 3 Years	After 5 Years	After 7 Years	After 9 Years	After 11 Years
Regular Students[b]						
Jewish (N=316)	14	34	47	48	48	49
Catholic (N=1245)[d]	14	32	46	47	48	48
Black (N=351)	8	26	35	37	38	39
Hispanic (N=348)	9	20	34	35	37	37
Open Admissions Students[c]						
Jewish (N=726)	2	13	30	31	32	33
Catholic (N=1449)[d]	3	12	26	27	28	28
Black (N=1023)	1	8	20	22	23	24
Hispanic (N=555)	3	11	21	23	23	24

Source: Sample data

[a]Results for 1970 and 1971 cohorts have been aggregated.

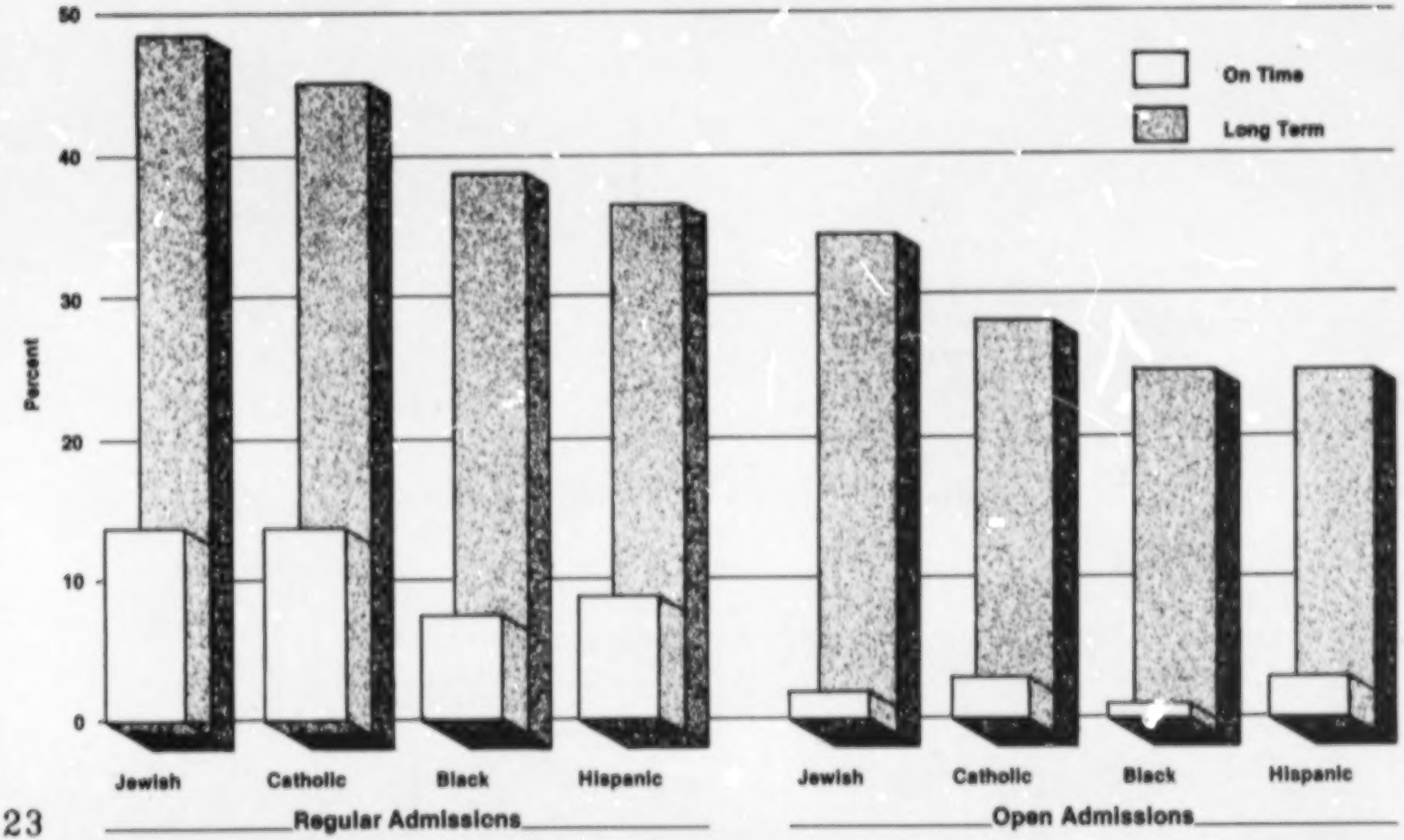
[b]Regular students are those with high school averages of 75 or higher.

[c]Open Admissions students are those with high school averages of less than 75.

[d]The term "Catholic" refers to non-Hispanic Catholics.

Figure 3

On Time And Long Term Graduation Rates By Ethnicity And Admissions Status: 1970 And 1971 Cohorts, Community Colleges



See Table 4 for explanatory notes.

are yet another indication of the handicaps which burden CUNY students who come from poverty backgrounds and with deficient high school preparation. Nonetheless, when viewed within the time frame of a decade, the findings also reveal that CUNY's policy of open-access has produced far more educational opportunity than many had imagined possible at the outset.

We note, however, that much of this success took place during a time (up to Fall 1976) when tuition at CUNY was free for both full- and part-time students. Financial aid was not particularly an issue and students who were pressed financially could cut back on their credits without incurring a dollar penalty. Since 1976 and the imposition of tuition, the picture has changed dramatically. Eligibility for New York State's Tuition Assistance Plan (TAP) is limited to full-time students, sharply reducing a student's options to move between heavier and lighter course loads. Aid for part-time students is available from the federal Pell program but is limited to those who are at the very bottom of the income scale. Though there is some serious talk in the New York State legislature today about aid for part-time students, the current financial aid regulations work as a constraint on educational opportunity, limiting the ultimate life chances of those who--for whatever reason--must attend college part-time or intermittently. We expect that, if financial aid policies were modified so as to align with the realities presented in this study, graduation rates might climb and open access to college and universities would come closer to fulfilling its promise.

NOTES

[1]These new analyses were made possible through the following update procedure: For a large sample of the 1970 and 1971 cohort populations (N=20, 182), matches were run against official CUNY graduation files covering the years, 1975-1982. This provided the most recent possible information on the graduation status of the members of these cohorts. Of course, some students undoubtedly transferred to colleges outside of CUNY and ultimately graduated. It has not been possible to include such students in our graduation update. Nonetheless, the figures presented in this study are the most complete available.

Because we are working with a sample of these populations, and the sample contains a slightly greater proportion of academically able students than does the total population, our estimates of graduation rates are probably somewhat higher than for the populations they represent. Overall we estimate that the sample rates exceed those in the population by about 5 percentage points. However, we have no reason to believe that the proportions of graduates earning degrees 6-11 years after entry are inflated. (For a detailed discussion of the quality of the sample data, see Lavin, Alba, and Silberstein, 1981, Appendix A.)

[2]Open admissions students are defined as follows: In the senior colleges they are students with high school averages (in college preparatory courses) of less than 80. Regular students earned high school averages of 80 or higher. In community colleges the open admissions category was composed of students with high school averages of less than 75. Regular students are those with averages of 75 or higher.

[3]These percentages are calculated from the data in table 1 in the following manner: The 11 year graduation rate was divided into the five year rate for each category. Subtracting the resulting ratio from 100 gives the percentage of graduates who took more than 5 years to graduate.

[4]These ratios were calculated as follows: in a given year the graduation rate for regular students was divided by the rate for open admissions students. For example, after 5 years the regular student rate was 53 percent and the open admissions rate was 32 percent. The former is 1.7 times the latter.

[5]Students who began at a community college and transferred to a senior college before earning a community college degree are not included in the base for calculating community college graduation rates. Rather, they are included in the senior college base. Only the first degree earned at CUNY is included in the calculations.

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